

COURAGE TO HOPE

Pad+ma dbang chen པདྨ་དབང་ཆེན།

My name is Pad+ma dbang chen and I was born in 1990 in Reb sa Village, Hor nag (Huangnaihe) Township, Reb gong (Tongren) County, Rma lho (Huangnan) Tibetan Autonomous Prefecture, Mtsho sngon (Qinghai) Province. Children my age often asked old men to tell them stories and an old man who knew many folktales told me the one I give below.

My village is located atop a mountain and, years ago, transportation was inconvenient. Only motorcycles could navigate the zigzagging, narrow track that twisted up the mountain. My village was an agro-pastoral area and Grandmother and Mother were occupied with farming.

Some small creeks are near my village. People did not drink this water because it is too salty. Instead, women went down the mountain to fetch water from a spring. They tied two white plastic containers to a donkey and spent half a day to fetch water. We also offered visitors this water.

Family members usually drank rainwater that was collected in summer in a big concrete, underground box in the center of our courtyard. Mother stretched a big square cloth in the courtyard, tying the corners with a rope and then to poles. A big stick was put in the center of the cloth above the reservoir opening. When it rained, water ran to the stick and dripped into the hole.

Our life was very poor. My family had about one hundred sheep, twenty goats, some cattle, and two mules. Grandfather grazed livestock on steep mountains and hills a two-hour walk from my village.

Grandmother (Sangs rgyas mtsho, 1938-2016) told me this story in 2013. It includes both happiness and suffering. The period of starvation that she experienced as an adult was especially dire. Half of

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her life was full of extreme trials. Nevertheless, she never stopped struggling to maintain her own life and the well-being of her family. She saved the younger generations of our family. She is a true heroine.

I am Sangs rgyas mtsho. I was born in 1938 in Phyi skor Village, which is situated in the south of Smad pa Township in Reb gong.

There were no natural disasters such as earthquakes, droughts, floods, and so on. And there were no man-made disasters such as conflicts, struggles, and torments at that time. Everything was like flowers blossoming in a pleasant garden, with birds chirping freely in the boundless turquoise-colored, dust-free sky, with honeybees pollinating various beautiful blooming flowers.

People were gathered, sitting in front of the *ma Ni* hall chanting, chatting, and boasting. They were optimistic because they were not worried about food and clothes for family members. They had excellent life conditions. On every villager's face was a sweet smile and a satisfied expression. Old men and women chanted scriptures and spun prayer wheels in the *ma Ni* hall while gossiping about a bride who had had an affair with a Muslim merchant.

"How incredible life is!" an old woman with a wrinkled face said, shaking her head.

They misunderstood Buddha's teachings that tell us how to be better and to not gossip, deceive, steal, and so on. Some blame themselves for having no good fortune and destiny, wishing for a better life. Certainly, the bottomless pit of human ambition is never filled.

My family consisted of my parents, older brother, older sister, and me. We were a well-off family because Father was a successful merchant. He bought wooden water buckets, saddles, plows, and such things from Bla brang and sold them to the local people. He profited a lot from selling these products. My family had twenty-five *mu*¹ of land and some cows, so we had plenty of grain. We also sold several old cows every year.

¹ 1.7 hectares.

Father also secretly cultivated poppies in our yard. When autumn approached, we cut the flower pods and collected the gum that seeped out. We dried the gum on a thin piece of square metal in a shady place of our family compound. The last task was to grind this dry material in a stone with a hole in the middle using a small smooth stone, and then put it in a clean bag. Father privately sold this powder to Chinese businessmen and this generated a lot of money. Local people did not know Father did this. The yearly earnings from this allowed us to buy coral and pearl ornaments. Each of my family members also had their own sheep-skin robe.

One day, Older Sister took Father's dagger to cut a poppy pod. Milky liquid seeped out. She held up a short stem of wheat and covered one end with a little cloth. She sucked the milk into the wheat stem, and covered the other end with a small piece of cloth. We could thus store the poppy milk in good condition.

She took me to the herding place to look for wild mushrooms. We soon found a big one. Sister washed it and then injected the poppy milk into the mushroom, smeared yak butter on it, and grilled it on a little fire. The mushroom became much smaller after it was cooked. A nice aroma filled the air. She divided it into two pieces, which we ate. The mushroom had a pleasant flavor that I had never tasted before.

Some women in our own village worked for my family doing farm work, herding the cows, and doing all our family chores. They also looked after Sister and me. We were energetic children because we focused on playing and eating. These workers prepared milk tea, roasted barley flour, and made meat dumplings. There was no work for me to do. It was the same for Brother and Older Sister. Father was often gone on business while Mother managed the workers and family matters. I was astonished that some of my peers worked hard with their parents. I was seven years old at that time and I did not understand why my friends worked like that.

In 1948, I was ten and my family circumstances changed a little because of a drought. However, Father's savings sustained us.

My family had extra money and grain to lend to villagers at interest. I was proud of having such a great father whose cleverness meant we did not suffer. Jealousy was an obstacle for everything. Father's ability and success meant that villagers resented him.

That hot summer, some officials came to my village to recruit several new soldiers. Unfortunately, Father was on the list of candidates. The managers privately investigated those on the list and planned to make an announcement two days later. Father anxiously returned home. He was depressed. Mother pulled him into a room and quietly talked about something that we could not overhear. Sister and I concentrated on listening but heard and understood nothing about the situation Father was in. Sister said that something had happened in Father's business, but we were too young to comprehend such things.

A clanging cymbal broke the tranquility of the morning. We were trained to gather in the *ma Ni* hall whenever we heard that sound. Father stopped eating and went out. The officials chose the soldiers and announced their names in front of the villagers. Father was selected, which meant that he would join the army. The meeting finished and villagers returned to their homes. Mother's eyes were red and she wore an anxious expression.

Father now had an army uniform and a hat. Older Sister and I were confused about Mother's unusual behavior. The army uniform also surprised us because we had never seen clothes so perfectly designed.

Father was to leave a month later. He was also ordered to wear the uniform in the village. The morning Father was getting ready to leave, he commanded, "You girls listen to your Mother and don't play all the time. We now have no workers and you two must do family chores with your Mother. Rin chen rgyal, you are seventeen and my only son. Take my position and keep the family in the same condition. You are now a man and the pillar of the family. A wise man does not ask his father to resolve problems when he reaches the age

of fifteen. I am going somewhere to help our fellow people who have difficulties. After the problems are solved, I will soon return."

He left without another word. We watched him until he vanished from our vision. Tears shone in Mother's eyes. We three children waved the sleeves of our robes as Father left.

Our life changed after Father's departure. Villagers did not return the money Father had lent them. Our situation got progressively worse. Brother tried his best to get the money we were owed, but he was unsuccessful. Villagers always postponed the time of repayment.

Four months passed in the blink of an eye. There was no sign of Father. My concern grew ever larger. When I asked Mother what had happened to Father, she said that he would return soon, but her depressed expression told me there was a secret we children did not know. I repeatedly begged and screamed at Mother to tell me the truth. Finally, she said, "You Father has gone to Lha sa to fight. An old man said Tibetans and another nationality had an argument over territory and we must eliminate evil people from Lha sa. I don't know what consequences this fighting will bring to Tibetans. But we cannot forget what your Father said and we must keep our promises. You don't need to worry about your Father, he is a brave man."

Brother was deep in thought and Older Sister fell into sorrow and despair. From that day on, laughter and smiles were absent in my home. Brother encouraged himself to focus on the family business. Mother said he was now a man. Sister and I helped Mother with family chores and farm work. Our neighbors spread rumors that Father had died. The fires of indignation exploded in Brother and he wanted to teach them a lesson, but Mother stopped him, fearing that he would cause great trouble. If something happened to Brother, our family line would vanish forever.

We constantly anticipated the day Father would come home. Our expectation resembled that of a man dying of thirst. My heart seemed to have been pierced by a knife. I was in excruciating pain. I regretted having been born a human. A terrible sensation rose in my

mind. I was afraid that my yearning for Father might be an empty longing.

One morning, I accidentally discovered that Mother's pillow gave off a sour smell and resembled a map, stained by her tears. I could not imagine how many nights she had been in agony, worried about Father. The moon had become her only nocturnal acquaintance. She heard gusts of wind outside and had thoughts deep in her mind. Some nights she could not overcome her painful thoughts of Father, took a sharp needle, and stabbed her index finger. She thought the blood that flowed out would alleviate her mental pain. Nevertheless, she wore a blissful smile and did her best to conceal her mental anguish.

Every night, Sister had a nightmare in which she called to Father in her sleep. Tears trickled from her eyes. Mother wiped them away with her right palm, embraced her, and stroked her head gently. Mother's tears streamed down her own face at such moments. She then began paying homage to Buddha every night.

Mother thought I was sleeping, but I privately sobbed sorrowfully beneath my quilt. I bit my lips to control my emotion. I did not want Mother to have extra worries because of me. Sometimes I thought women had nothing but tears.

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Three years faded away like a flash of lightning. I was now thirteen years old and perceived the true essence of life. There was no permanent happiness and no temporary sadness. Everything changed without reason.

News spread in the village that Father would soon return. My family was happy, even though we knew it might not be true. Brother went to the county town to inquire about Father. A carpenter from Bla brang said, "A mdo soldiers in Lha sa will soon return because the Tibetan army was defeated."

Brother laughed when he heard the news.

The carpenter was upset and murmured, "You laugh. I want to cry."

Brother could not figure out why the carpenter had said that, but he thanked him anyway.

Brother returned and informed us of the good news, which made us feel as though a butter lamp had been lit in a dark room. Mother removed her disguise and an unprecedented, truly happy smile emerged on her tanned face. Sister's appetite increased. She ate three bowls of noodles that night. How happy my family had become! My own little world became a fantasy garden and I had sweet dreams that night.

The moon no longer held Mother's attention that night. She fell asleep feeling wonderful. Brother's snores made me feel comfortable. I had not heard that sound for a long time.

The days passed, Father did not return, and then one morning our dog barked crazily outside. I heard a door squeaking open. I guessed Brother had gone out to see what the dog was barking about.

Three women beggars and a little boy were at our gate. Their hair was in braids, wrapped around their head. Hunger had cracked their dry lips. The little boy wheezed like an old man with bad lungs. Their faces were dark and spotted with mud. They wore tattered robes and were emaciated.

Brother was astonished to see such people and asked in surprise, "Where are you from?"

"We come from Lha sa," the oldest woman replied politely.

Brother comprehended what they were saying, though they spoke in a different dialect.

He asked, "Why do you come here? Are your relatives living here?"

"We are refugees. Many outsiders came to our land. Tibetan governors fought each other over property and territory. Everything was in disorder in Lha sa," the woman standing in the middle said desperately in a mix of A mdo and her own dialect, "We found a fortuneteller who told us that A mdo was a safer place to live. We escaped and have come here. Could you give us some food? My son has not eaten for two days."

Mother gave them *rtsam pa* and milk tea. After the meal, the little boy immediately became energetic and vigorously spoke in his dialect. They thanked Mother and bowed their heads.

"Do you know any A mdo soldiers?" Mother asked

"We heard that many A mdo soldiers came to Lha sa. I don't know any soldiers, but we saw an A mdo soldier team returning to their homes. There were about twenty handsome, strong guys in that group," responded the woman who could speak some A mdo.

Mother happily inquired if they had seen a man like Father and described him in detail.

They nodded their heads uncertainly. After a long talk, they got ready to leave. Mother wanted them to stay in our home for some days, but they insisted on going to the county town, which they thought was the best place to take refuge.

Mother wanted to ensure Father was alive and consulted a local fortuneteller. He fingered his prayer beads and said, "Your husband is in danger. Invite some men in your village to chant *Gdugs dkar chen mo* one hundred times. Next, climb up a holy mountain, burn *bsang* 'incense', and offer *rlung rta* 'wind horses', and then his situation will return to normal. Do it as soon as possible."

Mother thanked him, offered him a *kha btags*, and gave him some butter.

She returned home and did exactly as he had suggested. We put Father's karma and destiny in the hands of Buddha, hoping that Father would overcome the difficulties.

That night, Mother's nocturnal acquaintance experienced an eclipse, plunging our world in darkness. Villagers climbed up on the roofs of their houses using wooden ladders and prostrated to the moon. Some burned *bsang* and blew white conches as dogs barked loudly. Some set off firecrackers. All the village women chanted *ma Ni* melodies. When the moon is eaten by a demon, religious activities expel the demon and the moon soon reappears. Two hours later, the moon shone again and we all happily went back to bed.

Mother was deep in thought. When I asked Mother what she was thinking about, she said desperately, "The moon has given me an omen. I must beseech Mtsho sngon po 'Qinghai Lake' to protect your father!"

"Does a lake have such power? It's impossible that a lake can help Father," I said.

Sister pinched my arm and blinked at me, but I had no clue what she meant.

"We are Buddhists and cannot disbelieve a lake as holy as Mtsho sngon po. I will now tell you a story about Mtsho sngon po," Mother responded piously:

Long ago, King Srong btsan sgam po's clever general, Mgar stong btsan, neglected imperial rule. The king was enraged, gouged out the general's eyes, and banished him from Lha sa. The general had a son who took him to where Mtsho sngon po is now. At that time, there was no lake, only an enormous, boundless grassland. When they reached that place, they were very thirsty and lacked energy. The general asked his son to describe the place. His son complied, giving an exact description. The general instructed, "Go east to a well with a big stone lid. Water will flow out after you remove the stone lid. Be sure to put it back."

His son went there, drank all the water he wanted, and returned. But he forgot to replace the stone lid on the hole. After some moments, flood-like water swirled out of the hole.

"Run as quickly as possible!" the general said hoarsely.

The son was very strong, put his father on his back, and trotted up holy Gser chen Mountain. They sheltered there, watching thousands of nomad households destroyed by the water. Meanwhile, Master Padmasambhava in India saw this miserable disaster, invoked magic, and threw Mahadeva Mountain to stop up the hole. This formed the island, Mtsho snying 'Heart of the Lake', which we can now see.

After that entertaining story, Older Sister and I fell asleep.

Early the next morning, Mother quickly made an offering bag containing five kinds of grains, cloth of five colors, juniper, and a little bit of gold wrapped in a *kha btags*. If such offerings are thrown into Mtsho sngon po, it brings good fortune. Mother hoped this would keep Father safe.

Brother and Mother set out on for Mtsho sngon po. This trip would take many days. Sister and I stayed at home.

Late one night, some young village men came and stood outside our bedroom and talked, flirting with Sister.

"Let go of your arrogance! Your father won't return. Your family is not rich anymore. I'm interested in you. If you agree, please open the door," one young man said.

"You are unqualified to make judgments about my father whose heart is with the Tibetan people. He will live as a hero and die as a hero. You are cowards. It's better to shut your stinking mouth. One day, Father will come home and I'm sure you will be the first to lick his feet," Sister replied indignantly.

They were enraged, yelled at Sister, and then they left cursing.

Days passed as rapidly as a stream without looking back. Mother and Brother still had not returned. Sister and I were concerned that something bad had happened to them. We were annoyed that those guys came to our home every night. We were determined to find Mother and Brother, but we also had lots of work to do, so we stayed at home.

Days passed and then one hot summer day, Mother and Brother returned from Mtsho sngon po. Their horses were wet with sweat. Smelly vapor swirled in the air. Brother unsaddled the horses and took them into the stable to rest and eat fresh grass that Sister had cut on a grassland far from our home.

Mother was tired and thirsty, but her expression told me she was happy. I ran to Mother and threw myself into her warm arms, embracing her tightly. After feeding the horses, Brother came and softly stroked my head. Sister stood behind me as I quietly sobbed.

Mother recounted everything they had seen on the way to Mtsho sngon po and back. She truly believed that Father would be safe. She had put Father's destiny into the hands of the Buddha, who, if he had great power as people said, would demonstrate his power to us and save Father's life.

Mother managed the family businesses after returning. She attempted to force the villagers to return the cash, wheat flour, butter, and wooden tools they had borrowed or bought from us. Though Mother was intelligent enough to execute the family business, she had no strategy to get our money and property back from the villagers.

We lacked cash so Mother concentrated on getting the money that Father had lent to various villagers. She also wanted to show that she could manage everything without Father, otherwise we would be held in utter contempt by others. After long deliberation, she decided to engage Brother to a pretty girl who was a village leader's daughter.

Brother was old enough to marry and Mother was afraid that he would be negatively affected if his marriage was delayed. If villagers spread gossip and rumors, nobody would want to marry him.

Mother went to the county town with our neighbor, Tshe ba, to purchase a box of liquor, a carton of cigarettes, some *kha btags*, a roll of *prug* 'wool cloth for making robes', and one sheep carcass.

After returning home, Mother invited an eloquent man from a neighboring village and another old man who had an excellent relationship with the leader's family. Mother sent them with the presents she had purchased to discuss the wedding. When the two men offered gifts, Uncle Skal bsang smiled sweetly and greeted them in a seemingly generous, hospitable way.

After a long discussion, Uncle Skal bsang agreed. They then scheduled the wedding for the fifth day of the sixth lunar month.

The day before the wedding, we prepared fried bread, boiled sheep ribs, fruit, steamed bread, and baked bread piled high on plates lined on the tables at our home. Commercial liquor and homemade barley wine were put on both sides of the plates. Candy, peanuts, and

jujubes were scattered on the table. New wool felt carpets were placed on each side of the tables.

The new bride came at dusk the day before the wedding party and went to my neighbor's home to have her hair arranged. She wore a new lamb-skin robe.

Traditionally, we tied a round silver ornament with pieces of coral in the bride's hair. Mother chose a good-looking, hard-working woman who had living parents and children, and no illness. The woman braided the bride's hair into many braids and, at the end, tied a round silver ornament to her head. She also tied some tufts of sheep wool in her hair.

Brother's parents-in-law and relatives arrived the next day at eleven AM. Neighbors offered three cups of homemade liquor to each of them at our courtyard gate and exchanged pleasantries. One eloquent old man rhythmically recited auspicious words, holding a *kha btags* in his outstretched hands. Sister-in-law's relatives listened attentively. Our neighbors then invited them into our house and offered them what we had. The bride's parents optimistically said, "What a nice banquet!"

Mother and some female neighbors cooked noodles with sliced mutton in a big pot in the *ma Ni* hall. She invited all the villagers to have noodles so that my family would earn respect and lessen the contempt we that were held in. Mother certainly demonstrated that our family situation was still good.

All the villagers gathered in the *ma Ni* hall and had noodles. After a nice lunch, villagers came to my home and we started the entertainment part of the wedding by singing traditional songs. Songs were performed with one singer asking and another answering in song. Later, men made a circle and sang together. While the women sat in the courtyard, the men sat on felt carpets on the porch. A girl sang while hiding in a group of woman. Others could not see her.

After the banquet, the villagers' attitude changed. They treated us nicely. My family regained our good reputation and

eventually got everything back through the power of Sister-in-law's family.

Mother could now rest for a time, but she never stopped missing Father. Brother had learned a lot about businesses and could cope with the difficulties that arose. His confidence increased. He was proud to maintain what Father had entrusted him with. He somehow had a pleasant time with his wife.

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One mid-autumn day, Sister-in-law's father told Mother that Father would come home that night. Mother was somewhat suspicious, but clearly delighted. I could see excitement in her glimmering eyes.

The village children called Sister and me "fatherless." Every time I heard that, it broke my heart. The sudden news of Father's return was like glue, mending my fractured heart. I became energetic as blood surged through every nerve of my body. I was utterly rejuvenated. My confidence swelled to the point that I thought I would explode. I would no longer bear the name "fatherless." How happy I was!

Our hope that Father would return had crashed several times, but we never gave up, steadfastly believing that he would rejoin us. The only way to continue life is to become stronger than before. Mother never showed weakness to others. She always stood as firmly as a memorial stone that never toppled over.

Brother slaughtered a big fat sheep while chanting the Six Sacred Syllables. We prepared a banquet-like meal for Father. Two rapeseed oil lamps were placed on the adobe stove, where they shone brightly as the flames in the adobe stove danced energetically. We silently gazed at each other, expecting Father to soon appear. Our hopeful anticipation made us forget our hunger.

We waited a long time. Father did not come. We worried that he had encountered difficulties on the way home. The light from the oil lamp grew small and dim. Mother added rapeseed oil to the small metal oil-burner and the light brightened. The meat in the wooden plates cooled and the fat congealed.

"Please eat. You must be hungry now," Mother said just as we heard our courtyard gate swing open.

Mother quickly stood and went out in high-spirits. We followed. Mother stood like a zombie on the porch as Father motionlessly stood at the big courtyard gate. He was dressed in a worn-out army uniform and wore leather boots caked with dirt. His beard was long and bushy and his hair was a mess. Sister, Brother, and I ran to him, and embraced him tightly. Tears flowed down Father's face and plopped onto the ground. Meanwhile, Mother took a stick and beat Father's legs. She must have been happy about his return. Her beating was done silently without explanation. She gazed up at the sky and beheld a charming moon that smiled at her softly. Everything was utterly quiet as time seemed to pause.

Mother and Father touched their foreheads but did not embrace. I did not understand why they acted like that. Mother needed a hug and warmth. Their behavior shows how a couple should behave in public. Anyway, I embraced them both.

After this joy tempered with sorrow, Mother led us back inside and we began the happiest dinner ever. Father was like a hungry wolf, eating and drinking.

Mother told him everything that had happened, our family's current circumstance, and all the details of Brother's wedding party. Once Father understood our situation, he made a plan for our family that everybody would admire so that we would no longer suffer from jealousy.

"Rin chen rgyal, you are stronger than before and did very well in my absence. Persistence is the key to success," Father said to Brother patiently.

Sister-in-law gazed at Father in astonishment, thinking Father was an experienced man who educated his children differently than many parents. He did not force us to do something, but talked to us instead.

Father continued, "My dearest daughters, you two are old enough to marry. I have two sworn-brothers. Each has a son. I will betroth you to them."

I didn't know what this meant, nor did Sister, but we quietly nodded agreement. Mother was concerned about our well-being in other homes. Her expression made me sad. She seemed always to be concerned about us.

"You are not required to join the army again, right?" Brother asked.

Father sighed deeply and said, "Well, the war is finished, but I am now considered an enemy on the grounds that we were revolting. They have been looking for us everywhere. I am no longer safe."

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Father made marriage plans for Sister and me. Sister would marry the son of Father's sworn-brother in Ser rgyal Village. I would go to remote Reb sa Village and marry another of Father's sworn-brother's sons. I worried how long I could survive in a place that lacked drinking water.

Late one night, Father planned to escape with his friends. Meanwhile, the local government officials had learned of Father's whereabouts. Unfortunately, that night some local officers saw Father in town, followed him home, arrested him in bed, and put him in handcuffs. Mother screamed at the officers when they were violently taking Father to the county town prison. Mother and we three children could only cry and watch Father as he was tortured by those heartless officers. As Brother moved to protect Father, an officer hit his head with a black metal stick. He fell to the ground. Mother fainted. Sister and I held Mother and screamed loudly. Sister-in-law held Brother and wailed. Meanwhile, our family watch-dog barked furiously at the unfamiliar men who were unafraid.

"Remember what I told you. Keep your own lives. Persistence is the only key to success," Father said sadly, and soon vanished into the distance.

I hated the misery I felt and the life I was immersed. I considered suicide, but then Father's words swirled in my mind and I resolved to live and not disappoint Father. I calmed myself.

Mother's heart was broken and her personality changed after Father's arrest.

I have never forgotten that frightening night when Father was arrested. He never came back. We never knew what happened to him. The local government provided no information. Brother put a lot of effort in learning about Father, but he learned nothing.

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Spring stretched out its wings as it came to this unfair world, which contains hardship, unhappiness, and complexity. Spring blew to the grassland. The grass became green, the streams became clean, hibernating animals awakened, the air became fresh, and alert birds got busy building nests. Meanwhile, people were busy working in big fields.

I struggled as I quickly became a young woman. I was fifteen years old. How was it possible for me to go to such a place as my designated husband's home? I was confused about how to face a new life with such obvious challenges.

Mother and Brother decided not to hold a wedding party for my marriage. I understood my family's circumstances. I thought if I relied on Mother, I would never become an adult and be able to achieve anything meaningful for my family. I knew I would be a burden for Brother if I stayed at home. I thus decided to go to Reb sa Village as a bride.

"Not everything is decided by people. Reality dictates life's direction," Brother said. He bought me many colorful Tibetan decorations and some clothes. Mother gave me her coral necklace.

Mother saw me off outside of our home with tears shimmering in her eyes. I could imagine how much she suffered because of my departure. I held back my tears and gave her a beatific smile. I did not want to marry a man in another place, but I could not break my determination to keep my promise to Father.

Brother and some relatives escorted me to Reb sa Village, which was located on a mountaintop, six hours on horseback from my home. The process of going to Reb sa frightened me. The path was washed away in places and loose gravel shrouded much of the track that zigzagged up and along steep mountains. My imperfect horsemanship frightened me even more. Brother put a soft leather saddle on my horse's back so I would suffer less on the way.

We descended sloping hills to Smad ba, passing a village near a riverbank where there were many trees. We rested for some minutes as our horses enjoyed the dense grass under the trees. We then crossed Rong bo Nine River, which was small enough to cross easily. Our horses were accustomed to crossing rivers.

An hour later, we reached the foot of a mountain. I saw a narrow, zigzag path snaking up to the mountaintop. I had no clue how we would ascend the mountain. My strong determination had helped me set off and sustained me. It took four hours. I felt very uneasy along that rough path.

Everything has a beginning and an end and when we neared the village, I vaguely noticed a group of people waiting for us with *ka btags* and liquor. They seemed very kindly. Father had told me that the environment forms people's behavior so I supposed that savages resembling wild beasts must live in such a place. I was afraid. I was also curious to know what my husband looked like. We had never met.

They welcomed us with great respect and we exchanged pleasantries. Some pretty women in robes came, stood on both sides of me, and held my arms. I was in my lamb-skin robe with some heavy silver ornaments and I had covered my face with a red scarf. I could not walk steadily to my husband's home, so they helped me.

At the gate of the home, a woman held a copper kettle containing water mixed with powder brought from the local monastery. She poured a little in the palm of my right hand. I was expected to drink it. I then stepped with my right foot first across a smoldering sacrifice that smelled of juniper. This expelled evil from outsiders.

We then entered an old house that seemed ready to collapse. The main room had plenty of space for baggage and could seat nearly twenty people. Blackened walls covered with soot made the room seem even older. Next to the main room was an enclosure that reeked of sheep dung. I concluded the family was not poor. They had hundreds of sheep.

We sat in the room as they offered boiled mutton and beef. There was no food different from that in my home. We enjoyed a pleasant meal.

A man in a lamb-skin robe entered the room. The woman next to me said that he was my husband. He was slender and not tall. He had long hair and fair skin, which I thought was special, because many people's faces were dark and even black. His appearance satisfied everyone. I concluded he might not be the wild animal I had imagined. I did not know what his personality might be, nor what he thought about me. He welcomed Brother and my relatives. In turn, his relatives tied long red sashes around his waist. I did not know what it meant, but it seemed an auspicious custom.

Early the next morning, Brother and my relatives went back home.

I had much that I wanted to tell Mother, but I swallowed my words. I missed Father, cursed the officials that had taken him away, and hoped for the day he would be released.

I felt so lonely. Everything was new to me, but all my husband's family members were kind to me. I now had plenty of work to do, such as collecting yak dung and plants for fuel, herding sheep, and fetching water. My destiny changed and I was no longer a girl, but I still had no right to discuss family matters. How miserable that I had been reincarnated as a girl! What I could do was not talk and work harder.

Homesickness and hard work broke my desire for a happy life, but it was my obligation to work for my new family. I did not know what would happen next. When I became a member of that family, I

needed to support them. I tried my best to help my family have a peaceful, secure life.

Two years later, I delivered my first son, delighting my entire family. It also meant that my family members now treated me like a queen. I would have been scolded had I given birth to a girl.

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The sun was alone in the boundless blue sky at noon one day. No vultures, no birds flew under the hot sun. They were in their nests with their hatchlings, avoiding the heat. I took this chance to sun my husband's sheep-skin robe in our courtyard. The heat quickly made the lice flee from the wool. I held the collar and shook the robe several times. Lice fell out and struggled on the ground. Their futile wiggles made me tremble. I quickly picked up a brush, swept the lice together into a container, and threw them into a deep hole. I continued to find lice hiding in the wool and popped them between my thumbnails. Seeing the blood on my nails, I murmured, "My husband's blood! You cruel vampires are really heartless!" It was difficult to delouse the sheep-skin. I spent the whole afternoon doing it.

At dusk, my husband returned from the county town where he had purchased wheat flour and other necessities. Exhausted, he lay near the hearth and wiped perspiration from his face. I felt sympathetic, because he had been walking all day. I poured cool water in a bowl with a cooper scoop from a clay vat and handed it to him. He downed it in a single gulp, then untied his red sash, took off his robe, and showed me what he had bought and brought home in a wool bag. He was usually happy when he came from town, but he was not happy that night. I teased, "Who pulled your face down?"

"People in the county town are talking about government policies. Leaders will come confiscate our property and put all the fields together. All the villagers will have to work together. They want to reform the economic system and create a new system called commune production. Our way of life will soon change," he responded.

"Why are they doing this?" I inquired.

"People say they need money. They want to collect the money we make from hard work. They want to change our way of life," he replied.

I did not comprehend such complexities, but I was sure something bad would soon happen. Local people called such policies "Disaster." "Can this disaster destroy our life?" I asked.

"Nobody can predict what will come, but I'm sure starvation will befall us," he replied despondently.

"You are not the Buddha. Don't make a fuss," I said, stopping him from saying more and then I started cooking dinner.

...

That year, outsiders came to our community and built red brick rooms. Local officers confiscated our land and property and built a dining hall that provided workers two meals a day. Our work was very hard.

They also set up a nursery because little children would distract a mother from her work. Mothers should nurse and care for them. Enhancing work efficiency was the intention. Villagers had no right to refuse to send their children to the nursery.

One early morning, the local officers took all three-year-old children in our village, including my older son. I beseeched The Three Jewels, but got no help. I cursed the heartless officers and scolded the Buddha.

Parents who refused to comply had their children taken to the nursery. The officers used an electric prod on such people. We had never seen such a device before and were afraid to go near it.

The officers hired babysitters who had a good relationship with the local government and township officials. Children suffered in the nursery from poor food and dirty water. Some got sick and died. Parents were not allowed to see their children without local officials' permission. We did not know when we could see our children.

My husband and I fell into unbearable despair. Luckily, one of the babysitters was my neighbor. Her husband was influential,

thus she was able to become a babysitter. She told me, "Your son had diarrhea from eating spoiled leftovers. I secretly gave him medicine and he is now in high spirits all day. Don't worry about him. I'm taking good care of him."

I gratefully prostrated to her for saving my son's life. She also gave me a bag of *rtsam pa* and a little butter. That bag of *rtsam pa* saved my family. My husband got sick and my daily earnings alone could not feed all our family members. Her *rtsam pa* and butter were sufficient until my husband recovered. While delousing his sheep-skin robe, the many healthy lice shocked me. My husband was still weak and I worried that he would be unable to withstand what would occur next. I had just gotten a bag of poison made by a company in Shanghai to exterminate lice, which lessened my work, but the poison also had a very strong odor that decreased appetite and caused headaches.

...

Waking up in the morning, my attention immediately focused on the summit of magnificent Zhwa lung Mountain that resembled a warm wish, consoling me with the promise that my son would soon return to my arms. This expectation sustained and encouraged us to persevere and not abandon hope. There was a reason to live if I had a happy family and a lovely son.

One morning, I sacrificed *bsang* on the altar in our home while praying to Buddha to bring good fortune. That was all I could do for my son.

Everyone in the village cried for food and mumbled, "I'm hungry," as malnutrition and a severe lack of food took its toll. Children often went to a narrow valley near our village and drank salty water that made their lips dry and coated with white powder.

I was both happy and frightened, as my next story will show you: I was working in the commune production area. I was menstruating. I was very uncomfortable and needed to change my cloth to control the blood flow. There were many workers there. I told my situation to the officer in charge and asked for some free time to

change the cloth. Fortunately, he let me go somewhere where others would not see me.

When I finished changing the cloth and was ready to return, I saw a hawk catch a marmot right in front of me. The hawk held the marmot in its talons and bit the marmot's neck. The marmot struggled as the hawk killed it. I thought that the marmot and I had the same destiny. How pitiful we were! While in such despair, the hawk suddenly tossed the marmot away and flew westward. I did not know why the hawk discarded the marmot. I guessed it was the marmot's bad smell.

I optimistically remembered the exact location and happily returned to the work site.

At midnight under the bright moonlight, my husband and I donned our sheep-skin robes. They reflected less light and we hoped nobody would discover us. We set out for the dead marmot and soon found it. We went to a place with salty water. My husband skinned the marmot, cut it into pieces, and washed the pieces with salty water. This prevented the meat from spoiling. We buried the skin in a hole and took the meat home.

Nobody discovered us. My husband tied a string between pillars in a warehouse and hung the meat on the string. Even though I had not eaten any of the marmot meat, I felt full.

That marmot meat helped feed our family for a month. We had a little rice and wheat flour we had received in exchange for work points my husband and I earned from our work. Sometimes, we made soup with the marmot meat, porridge with wheat flour, and rice soup. Some families baked bread, which was too much for us, because it required a lot of wheat flour. Our biggest worry was that officers would discover our marmot meat. It was illegal to have food without their permission. Luckily, vigilance kept us safe.

People cried for food and had no energy to work. The local government was like a hibernating animal in a winter cave. The situation was like a hard-to-guess riddle. Policies were like summer weather that changed every moment.

One morning, my husband and I heard a magpie's melodious chirping, signaling we would receive good news. Moreover, I had dreamed of a man giving me an apple. I anticipated a miracle - that my son would appear before me. My husband guessed something from my expression and said, "Your hopes have brought good luck to us many times. It will be the same this time."

I knew he just wanted to make me feel better but still, I was encouraged.

"Life is full of complications and people ignore the causality that Buddhism teaches. We chant scriptures every day for all sentient beings to be free from hardship and suffering, but there are many monsters among Tibetans who will engage in horrible behavior if it brings advantages and their family members won't be hungry. I'm very afraid of the possibility that those monsters will kill us for a meal. Our fate is preordained and nobody can change it. It is better to accept reality. We will suffer in the coming year. Time will never be the same as before," I replied like a sage who had boundless experience and a deep understanding of life.

My husband made a face and said nothing, hinting that it was best for a woman to be quiet and not talk like a man. I knew I was lower than any male, but I wanted to express my feelings and expectations to my relatives and others. I had hatred, passions, and ideas just like men. Anyway, I could not do it, otherwise it would bring arguments and beatings, even though my husband was not cruel. For these reasons, I was like a mute most of the time.

At dusk, our village head came to our home and said, "There is a meeting in our township tomorrow morning. Your husband has been chosen to be a representative. Our village has five representatives. Don't let him be late or they will punish him."

"What meeting? Is there something to distribute to our village or is it collecting taxes?" I asked.

The village head whistled and pressed his right index finger to his lips in response.

At that moment, my husband was hiding the dry marmot meat in the warehouse. If the village head had learned that we had hid meat, we would be punished like criminals. I was suspicious of my husband being a representative. He had neither special skills nor abilities. I was frightened that he would fall into a suffering abyss and never return.

The next morning, my husband went to the township town. Nobody knew what the meeting was about. Three years had passed and I had not even seen so much as my son's shadow. I missed him day and night. I hoped that the meeting was about the release of our children.

In the afternoon, I prostrated in front of the family shrine where there were no Buddha images or scripture volumes. I just put a *bla ma's* picture there. Suddenly, I heard the door creak open and two figures appeared. I was speechless. It was my husband and son! Tears streamed down my face when my son hid behind my husband. Wordlessly, I stretched out my right hand, but he was shy. He did not recognize me, his mother. He was emaciated. His appearance had changed. He had become taller. He wore a tattered shirt and short trousers. He was now six.

"I'm your mother. Come here. I want to look at you," I said.

"My mother is over there in the nursery. I don't know you. I've never seen you before," he replied.

"I'm your real mother. I gave birth to you," I said.

When I went to hug him, he was afraid. Not only did he not recognize me, he was afraid of me. My brain almost exploded. My son's behavior broke my heart. I fell into depression.

I spent a lot of time telling my son the whole story of what had happened to him. He was reluctant to stay with us. He could not accept that we were his real parents. He had no empathy for me. Exhausted from trying to win him over, mental and physical suffering made me almost collapse.

My husband was unskilled at communicating with others and was usually quiet. Sometimes he said to our son, "Dear, please give

this to me, your father needs it." He never tried to force him. My son just gave it to him and was never disobedient.

Our strategies were completely different. I thought mine was best, but my son always slept with my husband. This confused me. However, I hoped that one day he would call me "Mother."

A gust loudly whooshed through trees when I was in bed one night. The sound made me recall a story Father had told me. When I was a little girl, I had wondered where the wind came from. When I asked Father, he told me this story:

Thousands of years ago, there was a splendid invisible place, where a deity lived peacefully with his followers. He divined that people on earth would fight each other for territory, power, and property. He thus created cold wind, tornadoes, and hail. He put each of them into a different bag. When people are dishonest and greedy, he punishes them by what he created. He opens the hail bag to destroy crops, buildings, and fields to make people feel the suffering of starvation and homelessness. When they are loyal and sincere, he closes the bag. The earth is square. When a tornado comes, it catches people and takes them to the edge of the square, where they tumble into a place they will never be rescued from.

I gradually began dreaming:

A monster chased me in a valley where I had gone to collect yak dung. Gathering my courage, I ran away. I was exhausted after crossing several creeks. The creature almost caught my right leg. I was terrified and ready to abandon hope, but then I heard a familiar sound in the distance. I listened carefully and then I realized it was my son. He called me "Mother" several times. I continued to run and then I fell. With a screech, I woke up and saw my son beside me. I thanked Buddha for saving me from the nightmare.

"I'm sorry I did not acknowledge that you are my mother," he said, kneeling on the ground to express his regret.

"How can I grumble that you are unwilling to accept me as your mother? It's not your fault. Those monsters separated us for three years," I replied.

When I tried to embrace him, he vanished. I guessed that a ghost had taken him away, otherwise it was impossible that he was gone. I sobbed while calling his name. Nothing happened. I felt great pain, like an awl was stabbing my heart. Wanting to commit suicide, I banged my head against the wall.

I awakened. Tears dampened my pillow. My husband was snoring and my son was asleep in his arms.

"Such a horrible dream," I thought, and went back to sleep.

Nothing had changed when I woke up again. My son stared quietly at me as before.

Later when I told the dream to my husband, he laughed and said, "Dream in a dream. What an interesting dream!"

After breakfast, my son went outside. Some children his age were playing chess, which most boys liked. He overheard the children talking about how some children who had been released from the nursery did not accept their real parents, and then behaved very badly toward their parents.

At night when I returned from work, he was sitting in the living room motionlessly.

"I will cook delicious noodles for you tonight," I said.

"Mother, where is Father?" he asked.

I did not respond. Tears painted my face. I was uncertain. Was it a dream? I pinched myself hard. The resultant pain assured me that I was in the real world. I rushed to him and embraced him tightly. My small world was suddenly full of blossoming flowers.

...

Two years passed. Change came again. The local township officials gathered all the locals in Ri gong ma Village near the township town. We were ordered to empty our houses for strangers who would soon arrive. Our village head said, "Many outsiders from Hunan Province

will come to our place. Hunan is somewhere none of us have ever been. They lack food and many have endured terrible starvation. They are coming here to lessen their local government's heavy burden. Please gather what you need. Nobody can predict when we can return to our homes."

We loaded some of our belongings on saddled mules and moved to Ri gong ma Village, where our village head arranged a room for each family. A house had seven or eight small rooms. The wooden houses there with adobe walls were very attractive, and impressed us. We seldom saw such clean, new buildings. My family had a room in a big house located in the center. There were seven families in that house - a total of fifty people. It was like a nest of ants with people constantly coming and going.

The next day, an official said, "We have changed the food rations and work schedule. You will receive food every day and no longer need to worry about being hungry. In addition, please put up with the outsiders and don't trouble them. If you make trouble, I will punish you."

I could earn three food tickets a day. A ticket could be exchanged for three pieces of bread in the canteen that the local government had built. People's faces changed a little by having such good bread. Unfortunately, the official ordered the cook to grind wheat stalk into powder, mix it into wheat flour, and bake the bread. The bread tasted good to me, even though the recipe was unacceptable. However, some children were too young to adapt to such food and died from constipation.

My husband and I earned an extra twenty-eight food tickets, which we could use in the county town to buy shoes, clothes, wheat flour, rice, salt, candy, jujubes, barley wine, tea bricks, pepper, and so on.

As winter approached, my husband went to the county town to buy boots for Father-in-law, Mother-in-law, himself, my son, and me; a small bag of wheat flour; a plastic bag of candy; salt; and a tea brick. We knew we would enjoy the winter. We were content.

Two years later, the outsiders returned to their homeland. A high-positioned leader probably legislated a new policy. We then returned to our own homes.

The outsiders had damaged our two rooms. They had collected wood and burned them for fuel. I was furious by such destruction from such heartless people. My husband said, "Don't be angry. You would have probably done the same if you had been in their situation."

My husband repaired the rooms and I cleaned. After we finished, I went to collect yak dung near our village, where I stumbled on several rotting, stinking corpses. Innumerable insects struggled in their bodies. Villagers soon surrounded and gazed at the corpses, covering their mouths and noses with their hands.

Several days later, this horrible odor continued to waft. Vultures were too disgusted to eat the corpses. Our village head then took some men to bury them and chant sutras.

We were busy making a new living and readying ourselves for the next challenges.

...

I had another dangerous experience. I will tell you about it now. Oh, I need to go to our *ma Ni* hall, chant scriptures and turn the prayer wheel with my other friends! Life is good now and I don't worry about anything. My only job is to chant scriptures as many times as possible and turn the prayer wheel often. The more times I do this, the better reincarnation I will have.

I have three sons and three daughters. They are very successful and they have made their own lives. My oldest son attended school and now teaches Tibetan and math to local students. He gets a good salary from the government. I live with him. Others married kind, admirable spouses. I have many grandchildren. My dear husband passed away years ago from a liver disease and was reincarnated as a boy in my village.

Life gave me many challenges, but I overcame them all.

Some people ask, "How would you summarize your life?"

I reply, "If you have the courage to hope, no matter how small, happiness will follow you everywhere."

NON-ENGLISH TERMS

a mdo ཨ་མདོ།
 bla brang ལྷ་བླང་།
 bsang བསང་།
 gdugs dkar chen mo གདུགས་དཀར་ཆེན་མོ།
 gser chen གསེར་ཆེན།
 gter གཏེར།
 gter kha གཏེར་ཁ།
 hor nag ཧོར་ནག་
 Huangnaihe 黄乃亥
 Huangnan 黄南
 kha btags ཁ་བདག་ས།
 lha sa ལྷ་ས།
 ma Ni khang མ་ཎི་ཁང་།
 mgar stong btsan མགར་སྟོང་བཙན།
 mtsho sngon མཚོ་སྟོན།
 mtsho sngon po མཚོ་སྟོན་པ།
 mtsho sngon khri shor rgyal mo མཚོ་སྟོན་ཁྱི་ཤོར་རྒྱལ་མོ།
 mtsho snying མཚོ་སྟོང་།
 phyi skor ཕྱི་སྐོར།
 Qinghai 青海
 reb gong རེབ་གོང་།
 reb sa རེབ་ས།
 ri gong ma རི་གོང་མ།
 rin chen rgyal རིན་ཆེན་རྒྱལ།
 rlung rta རླུང་རྟ།
 rma lho རྩ་ལྷོ།
 rtsam pa རུས་པ།
 sangs rgyas mtsho སངས་རྒྱས་མཚོ།

ser rgyal སེར་རྒྱལ།
 skal bzang སྐལ་བཟང་།
 smad pa སྐད་པ།
 srong btsan sgam po སྟོང་བཙན་སྐམ་པོ།
 thun rin ཐུན་རིན།
 Tongren 同仁
 tshe b+ha ཚེ་བླ།
 zhwa lung ཞ་ལུང་།